

## BIBLE VERSIONS

INTRO: (Read Ps. 119:89; 138:2; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21)

It has been my intention for some time to do a message on how to take a wife. In my preparation, that developed into several messages. And now the summer season is upon us and we may not have consistent attendance for several consecutive Sundays, and so I have decided to fill in those Sundays that I am scheduled for by redoing several messages that I would like to have available on CD or DVD for the church and also for our sermonaudio folk.

The message I am to redo this morning is on Bible versions. To reduce that subject to a single message means there has to be a great reduction of information. So I am reducing this whole subject to what I believe are the two most crucial points. I am trusting the Lord to do this reduction and communicate the view I hold while shedding sufficient light on these two points. So that is my challenge and task this morning, while yours will be to think and follow with me. I did a message on this subject a number of years ago, but it is not on sermon audio and also, I did want to add, what I feel is an important point.

I want you to understand that I am giving you my own opinion on this subject. No matter what position you hold, you are holding an opinion. There is no conclusive evidence on this subject matter. What we do is gather the factual information we do have and from that we form an opinion.

Now the two points we will be looking at are the transmission and the translation of the Biblical texts. You will have to stay with me, and you will have to concentrate and think clearly to follow this morning. If you do not, you will not understand the subject because it is condensed so very much.

Our first point then is the transmission of the biblical texts.

### I. THE TRANSMISSION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXTS - Manuscripts

So, let me introduce this point by way of explaining what we are talking about here. God has chosen two ways of communicating with man. There are two kinds of revelation. There is what we call general revelation. General revelation is all that information that is available to us through our senses. Psalm 19 describes it for us in verses 1-4 (read). We get our knowledge about the world and the universe through general revelation.

But there are things we need to know that we cannot learn

from general revelation. For example, we can learn from general revelation that there is a God. We can even learn much about that God from general revelation. We can learn that God is a God of order. But we cannot learn from general revelation who this God is or if there is only one or how we can know this God. For that, we need special revelation.

Special revelation is when that God or those gods that exist reveals to people in language who God is or who those gods are. Now the Bible claims to be a book that contains numerous books that are claimed to be special revelation. So the Psalmist, in Psalm 19 goes on to speak of this special revelation (read 7-11). Let us turn to Hebrews 1 to see what the Bible claims (read 1-2).

If the Bible truly is the Word of God, and we do not doubt that it is so, then how did we get such a book? Well, according to Hebrews 1:1-2, God spoke in times past to the early fathers by the prophets. These prophets wrote down what God moved them to write and those writings began to form what we call special revelation. And so, some 2500 years after creation, the first book of the Bible was written. Now it is possible that Job was written before that but we do not know the date of the book of Job. We do know roughly, the book of Genesis. Now, when that first book was written, it was what we today call a manuscript. A manuscript is a hand-written copy of a writing.

So, we want to look very briefly at the 39 manuscripts of the OT.

#### A. OT manuscripts

I want to cover the 39 OT books very briefly because they do not present to us the chief problems of versions today. I want to point out this about the OT. The OT was written between 1500 BC until about 400 BC. The final sum of books was 39. There are many discussions as to how it was determined which books were ultimately divinely inspired and how it was determined. I hold the view that God divinely oversaw that the books He had inspired became part of what we call the Bible.

Now here is what happened. From early times, Scribes were carefully trained to make hand written copies of these books. They were so carefully trained and so meticulous with their work that today we have more NT words in question than OT words. They were so carefully trained that the Lord Jesus, the One involved in the inspiring of

these writings in the first place said in Matthew 5:18, "...till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law will all is fulfilled." That was after the book of Genesis had been rewritten for 1500 years!

But in the 20th century the Masoretic text of the OT came under serious attack. Huge questions were raised about the validity of the Masoretic text, the Hebrew text that underlies all modern versions today. But, at the time Israel became a nation, one of the greatest discoveries of the 20th centuries was made. It was the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. (Picture).

Today you can go to a museum in Israel called the Shrine of the Book, and see a fully unrolled copy of the book of Isaiah. This discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls silenced the critics so that even today, the Masoretic text underlying our OT is not questioned. The versions, as far as I know, all use it and that is simply incredible in our day of liberalism. So, we will let that suffice, though we have left out reams of information regarding the OT text of the Bible, God's special revelation to man.

#### B. NT manuscripts

When we come to the NT, we have a rather different picture. Some 15-20 years after Jesus ascended to heaven, divine revelation related to the New Covenant was given to man by God. Over the next 50 years, 27 books were written that we claim are divine or special revelation. It took another 300 years before the Church recognized all 27 books as inspired. And so, by 400 AD, we had a book of 66 books and these 66 books have since formed what we call the Bible. The OT containing 39 books and the New, 27 books.

Now what happened was that many churches were started in many different places. And as these churches increased, so did the demand for copies of the NT. However, the NT books were copied by many different copyists, and not all of them were trained for the work so that soon many variations of NT books came into existence. When a copy with an error was used that error was multiplied. This is where the major manuscript problem occurred. So this problem is basically related to the 27 books of the NT.

Let me share very briefly what happened. Very early in church history the Greek NT was translated into

different languages. Lectionaries, prayer books containing Scripture were written. Manuscripts were recopied.

So, over the past 2000 years, manuscripts were copied and recopied. These manuscripts were used to make new translations into other languages. And so various things took place that brought us to the 19th and 20 centuries when efforts began to be made to go back and find out what the actual original wording was, and here is where the manuscript problem comes in. You see, we do not have any 'original' manuscript to compare modern manuscripts to. We have to try to find the original wording from various information we do have. When the KJV was translated they had only a handful of manuscripts of the NT. Today we have over 5300 manuscripts or parts of manuscripts. Of these manuscripts, not two are the same.

### 1. Groupings of NT manuscripts

So, modern scholars have taken all the evidence available and have tried to get back to the original text. This is an extremely complicated field. But these manuscripts, because of their similarities or dissimilarities can be grouped. Today it is viewed that there are four major groups called the Alexandrian text, the Western text, the Ceasarean text and the Byzantine text. By far the majority of those texts are Byzantine texts and so when you hear of the Majority text you understand that those are Byzantine texts. The KJV and the NKJV are the only common English Bibles I know that come out of the Majority text.

### 2. Positions re: NT manuscripts

From studies over the years on the manuscript problem, several major positions have arisen regarding these manuscripts. Let me simplify these to two major positions: 1 The majority text or Byzantine is the best text. 2 The oldest manuscripts are the best. 3 The true text must be found by using all the manuscripts. This latter view still gives the most attention to the oldest texts.

### 3. Personal position re: manuscripts

It is my personal opinion that the Majority text is the best text. One of the main reasons I hold to this

view is this: The Byzantine text, from which the KJV comes, was by far the most prominent text from about 400 years after Christ until in the 20th. century. If the Byzantine text is the worst text, then the Church was left with the poorest manuscripts for some 1500 years. I would have to have more evidence than I have found so far before I can accept that.

Now, there is a problem that has been leveled against the Byzantine text. The problem is this: No real old copies of this text can be found. Some of the manuscripts in the other groups go back to within a few years of Christ, but not so with this text.

However, the most common view held by Bible teachers today is that the oldest texts are the best. That, of course, means the newest are not as good and therefore the KJV has been downplayed for a number of years now. So in many commentaries you will read such statements as, "The oldest and best texts say," or, "the most reliable texts say." On the other hand, a few scholars hold that the oldest manuscripts are not the best, they are the worst. Here is a basic argument for that this view: The good manuscripts were used and reused for copying until they wore out, which happens of course. The oldest extant manuscripts were not used for recopying because they were poorly done or done by inexperienced copyists. According to this argument we have only more recent copies of the Majority text because they were used and reused until they were worn out.

Personally I hold to the latter view. I personally believe that the majority text is the best text. You do not have to agree with me. Most don't. I always say and hold to this, regardless of which view you take: No one can say the oldest manuscripts are the best for nobody can prove it. Also, nobody can say the majority text is best because nobody can conclusively prove it. All you can say is, "I think..." or "I believe..." This is true because we do not have one single original manuscript. But let me say this against the 'oldest are best' view.

Let me give you these conclusions I've come to so far in this whole debate of manuscripts. First, manuscript variants affect a relatively small part of the wording of the whole Bible. Some claim that as much as 99% of the wording is that of the original manuscript. The NKJV gives the most conservative percentage of 85% of

the text being identical in all manuscripts. So by far the most of the text is unquestionable. Second, it is also agreed that the variants of the manuscripts do not change any major doctrine. The doctrine of salvation or the doctrine of Christ or God or the Holy Spirit would not change, regardless of which manuscripts were used. However, let me give this caution. Because it does not affect a very high percentage of the NT text does not mean it is unimportant, because we are dealing here with the Word of God.

Third, I think the manuscript problem has innocently overshadowed a more important problem, or it has been used to hide the more important matter, and that is the translation of the biblical texts.

## II. THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

So let me begin our second point on the translation of the Biblical texts with this observation that over the years, the big battle of versions has been with regard to the manuscripts. But I think that the attention has been drawn to that matter to such an extent as to cause us to overlook an even greater matter, one that is not given much attention at all. I think that only the NKJV has given proper recognition to this issue. It says in its introduction, and I quote, "Bible readers may be assured that the most important differences in English New Testaments today are due, not to manuscript divergence, but to the way in which the translator views the task of translation: How literally should the text be rendered? How does the translator view the matter of biblical inspiration?" In my research I came to that very same conclusion. And when I read those I was refreshed by what they had written.

So I present to you this morning two major points. First, the one we have already looked at, the transmission of the Biblical text. This is the manuscript problem. And second, the translation of the biblical text. This is the method problem. My conclusion is that the method of Bible translation has effected far more of the biblical text than the manuscript problem. I developed and taught a course a number of years that I called "Grammatical Exegesis." When you do careful grammatical work in English in the NT, the method of translation becomes a glaring problem. However, with the lack of grammatical teaching in our schools in the past several decades, I do not see how students of the Bible will catch this great flaw in Bible

translation.

The quote from the introduction to the NKJV asked two questions of the Bible translator. First, how literally should the text be rendered? Now this is a huge question to the translator. Anybody who knows two languages has some idea how difficult it is to express meaning and nuances in another language. Try telling some low German jokes in English and people wonder why anybody laughed. It's because it is almost impossible to translate that exact expression into another language.

Now in Bible translation here is a rule of thumb that was a standard for a long time: "So frei wie möglich; so frei wie nötig." In English we would say, "As literal as possible, as free as necessary." This method of literalism has long ago been replaced by other method. Having worked with the original languages to some degree and with English grammar as well, I think the saying, "So frei wie möglich; so frei wie nötig", is correct. But this method has been almost entirely replaced with another view. That other view is thought by thought translation rather than word by word. It is called the dynamic equivalence method. The arguments for this view sound good, but the results are disastrous.

Let me try to demonstrate the difference. Let us look first at the manuscript problem. Some time ago I did a detailed analysis of Ephesians 1:3-14. This is one sentence in the original text. I compared the Majority text with the United Bible Society's text which seeks to find the original wording in all 5000 Greek MS. Here is what I found in this text. You will remember that I said earlier that the biggest issue is not the manuscript issue but how one translates the text we do have. In the Greek text of Ephesians 1:3-14 there are 6 minor manuscript variations. One Greek text had 202 words and the other 203. The difference of one word being an untranslatable particle spelled *te*. Of those 6 minor variations only two affect translation. Neither of those make a significant difference.

But, when we look at the matter of translation, we do not get past the first word without a considerably large difference in wording. So, let me take you to the Ephesian text to show you how one's *method* of translation affects translation. Ephesians 1:3 begins with the Greek word *eulogeetos*, which means *blessed*. The NIV translates this word as *praise*. If the manuscripts gave the difference that one had 'praise' and the other 'blessed' that would

be considered a major difference. Yet the difference is made in translation but it is not there in the Greek. One of the modern versions I compared was the Contemporary English Version. Now in my estimation that version does not deserve to be called a version. It is so far off the mark as to cease to be worthy of being called a version. But it says, "Praise the God and Father..." Now it is good to praise the God and Father, but this text does not say that. The point in question is, is the original text inspired by God? Well, there is no doubt about that for Bible believers. According to the Bible itself, every word is God breathed. The God breathed word here is *eulogeetos*. The best literal rendering is *blessed*. Now what has happened in the CEV and NIV? The NIV has turned an adjective into a noun and that, a noun that does not even exist in this verse! There is a considerable difference between *blessed* and *praise*. Grammatically one is an adjective and the other a noun. And the meaning is altogether different. The Greeks have a word for *praise* and if God had wanted that word there it would have been there. It is not there because the God breathed word is *eulogeetos*.

The CEV goes even farther astray and makes an imperative verb out an adjective. Now sometimes the translator is almost forced to do something like that but in this text there is absolutely no reason not to remain literal as do the KJV and NKJV. Now this kind of thing happens so much in modern translations it would take volumes to describe the differences in one book like Ephesians. And all of this simply because of the method of translation.

Now I want to add something here. Many times people have said to me, "But I can understand this new version so much better." And here is the real question: "But is what you understand actually the Word of God?" Recently we have had Warren Smith, an ex New Ager with us. He showed how the 'Message', one of the latest renderings of the NT translates the Lord's prayer. In the NKJV Matthew 6:10 says, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Now here is the translation of the Message: "Set the world right; Do what's best—as above, so below." Now you may say, "I can understand that so much better. It is so easy to understand." But what do you understand? Certainly not the inspired Word of God! Warren pointed out to us that the phrases, 'as above so below' are fully New Age terms. They are both very ancient and very New Age expressions! So if you and your children read this text, you are being prepared for what lies ahead in the Church and it is extremely dangerous. And to make it all worse,

big name speakers such as Charles Swindol and David Jeremiah use this rendering of the NT and I fear deeply what lies ahead for the Church!

If we were to take just the few verses of Ephesians 1:3-14 and discuss the errors created in the methodology of modern translations, we would be here a very long time. I have not time to discuss the sentence divisions and how much is affected simply by that matter alone.

Now I want to tell you what I see has happened to the Church. When the KJV was originally published, it was not well accepted. Errors were made in the early printings and the KJV Bible was given various derogatory names. But by and by it began to be accepted until it became the English translation of the Bible. Then came modern textual criticism and out of that came newer translations, developed mostly because of the manuscript differences. These new translations were rejected outright by the Church in general. But slowly they began to be accepted. These were translations like the NASV. The method of translation remained on track, but the manuscript favored were not the same.

By and by this version was accepted and used in many Bible schools. Then another version appeared, and another. And into these newer versions new methods of translation were adopted. In the Church we had grown used to change, not only in various translations but in such things as music and dress as well. When we became used to change making new translations became a money making business. Translators or paraphrasors could get away with almost anything in their work and make money at it too. And today, the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is being denied, not so much by openly denying it, but in undermining it in new translations and paraphrases. The method of doing translation, in my estimation, has been overshadowed by the manuscript issue and is doing much greater damage than the manuscript issue ever did.

CONCL: In concluding this message, according to the views I have expressed to you this morning there are two major problems in Bible translation. The first has to do with the manuscripts of the biblical text. That, in my estimation is the lesser of the two problems but is usually put forth as the major issue. The second is the matter of how to translate the biblical text.

I give my own conclusions for whatever they are worth to you. First, with regard to the manuscripts: I believe that the manuscripts that the KJV and NKJV come out of are the best.

Second, with regard to translation: I believe the only possible way to translate the biblical text in such a way as to best present the thoughts of God to man is the method which treats the text as literal as possible while still making it readable in the new language.

Let me say a word about the KJV in closing. Some have exalted it to the position of being the text from which to measure others. That is an error. The original languages must always be kept in that position. Some seem to view it that if you do not use the KJV, you are probably lost. That is wrong. David Reagan recently said in his news letter from Lamb and Lion ministries that it is time to set the KJV aside. I believe that is wrong, nor is it about to happen, if I see it right. Let me say this for both the KJV and the NKJV: they are both better translations of any biblical manuscripts than are any new versions that use other manuscripts. If you do grammatical exegesis from the Greek text and the KJV it is superior to any other translation available in English other than the NKJV.

Now let me say this for the NKJV from my perspective. I have studied at least some writings leveled against it and have not found any to stand the test of factual data. From my brief experience, the NKJV is more consistent in translating any given word in the same way in other places where it is used. The KJV takes more liberties, liberties that I think are not really justified in some cases. I am not an expert in this area, but those are my conclusions.

And then I want to say this, again from my own perspective. I used to not discourage the reading of some of the easier to read new translations for people who have reading disabilities. The translation called "The Message" has changed that for me. I see the new translations and paraphrases coming on the scene as subtle and dangerous in that they, I think, purposely put thoughts into the minds of people that the original does not intend and the writers of these Bibles are able to put New Age thinking, or their own thinking into the minds of people without the reader having an idea it is happening. I would now recommend in English, the KJV or the NKJV. As a shepherd, I believe I can say that using these texts is safe and good.

Now you may say this morning, "I believe the eclectic text" or "I believe the oldest manuscripts are the best. Are there any safe versions using these texts as far as method of translation is concerned?" In such cases I would recommend the older NASV or the modern ESV.